

Fewer Representatives or More Monitors?

Matt Yglesias saw Lawrence Lessig speak about the problem of money in politics concluded his concern on the influence of money in politics was “[too narrow](#)”. I tend to agree that Lessig’s focus is a bit too narrow — that’s why I started [the PCCC](#) — but I was shocked by Yglesias’ “broader” solution: fewer elected officials.

Matt’s focus on institutional reforms is definitely a well-needed antidote to most political journalists’ tendency to focus on personalities and other small-picture details, but in this instance it’s just crazy. In what sense is the number of elected officials broader than the influences that come to bear on them?

Matt seems to be arguing that countries with fewer elected officials are better run because voters can monitor the performance of those officials better. I don’t see how this argument can possibly survive engagement with the details of our political system.

Let’s take health care, since that’s in the news lately. Health care has basically been talked about nonstop by every news outlet, yet even voters who follow these things in detail have no clue what’s really in it. (This is true even of my friends who are political junkies; they know a public option isn’t in the bill, but they basically have no idea what the exchanges are or how they would work.) When election season rolls around, campaigns will begin running lots of ads about the health care bill. None of these ads will help inform them what’s in it. And the press will continue not to inform them about what’s in it.

I don’t see how having fewer elected officials will change any of this. The problem is not that voters try to monitor their elected officials but are simply overwhelmed; the problem is that voters have no tools for actually monitoring their elected officials in any meaningful sense. Yes, one can point to a [Chris Hayes flowchart](#) here or [an Alec MacGillis guide](#) there, but there’s no way any significant number of voters know how to find those things. And even if you tell them about those, there’s no system for finding similar documents about issues in the future.

And that’s the biggest issue Congress is considering this session! And that’s just its broadest outlines! The health care bill has thousands of pages of detailed provisions and it’s just one of thousands of bills Congress is trying to pass. There’s nobody who’s even reading all of those provisions, let alone trying to figure out which ones are good ideas and which representatives are fighting for the good ideas.

Instead, there’s a vast industry of lobbyists, each of which care really deeply about a handful of those tiny issues and are willing to spend vast amounts of money and effort persuading members of Congress to take their side. On most issues, they face no opposition. So naturally, the members take their side.

What’s needed is not fewer representatives, but better monitoring systems and institutional incentives to make monitoring less necessary. Better monitoring systems is what I’m working on and better institutional incentives is what Lessig is fighting for. If Matt thinks that fewer representatives is a better or “broader” solution, I’d like to hear him explain how it’s going to help.

Disclosure: I’m on the board of Lessig’s group, Change Congress.

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